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CHARLES BEARD & THE ENGLISH HISTORIANS

*Richard Drake**

At the time of his death in 1948, Charles Beard was the most famous historian in America. His books sold in the millions of copies. In his best-known work, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (1913), he argued that the material interests of the founding fathers explained their key decisions at the constitutional convention of 1787. In subsequent books about other phases of American history, he repeated his insistence that money and politics never could be separated. More than any other single factor, their indissoluble union accounted for the crucial turning-points in the nation's past and present. Beard's economic interpretation held the field for a generation and still commands a significant following. Where and how this most influential of all twentieth-century American historians acquired his understanding of history remains inadequately understood.

To the question of where Beard discovered the economic interpretation of history, his wife, Mary Ritter Beard, offered some authoritative answers in her memoir of him, *The Making of Charles A. Beard*. Following a rural boyhood in Indiana and a turn at local journalism, he attended nearby DePauw University. While in college and taking a course on practical sociology, he visited Jane Addams's Hull House in Chicago, a city where the extremes of poverty and luxury shocked him. The contrast between the rich and the poor, she observed, "made a deep and lasting imprint on his mind and influenced his future activities."¹ Only after going to Oxford as a graduate student in 1898, however, did Beard begin to develop a historical understanding of the economic forces that shaped politics and culture. Although

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1. MARY RITTER BEARD, *THE MAKING OF CHARLES A. BEARD: AN INTERPRETATION* 14-15 (1955).

he met many outstanding scholars at Oxford, the author who influenced him the most was the art historian and social critic John Ruskin, formerly an Oxford professor but by then retired and in his dotage. According to Mary, Ruskin gave her husband his first real understanding of how the world worked and for whose benefit. She wrote, "Beard regarded Ruskin's philosophy as set forth in his small book, *Unto This Last*, as an acme of wisdom and usually had it in his hand or pocket as a bracer."² He had read the book while still in college, but his life experiences in England fully brought home its lessons to him. As Beardianism begins in Ruskinism, it becomes necessary here to examine this singularly influential book in his young life.

Originally published in 1862, *Unto This Last* took its place in a long line of anti-modernist British preachments dating back to William Wordsworth's preface to *Lyrical Ballads* and which also included Thomas Carlyle's *Past and Present*. To this tradition of cultural conservatism, Ruskin brought distinctive rhetorical gifts and the particular insights of the most important art historian of the age. He thought that a calamitous disorder afflicted the modern world, where genuine art and even basic decency could lead only a fugitive existence. A life-long Tory, Ruskin ruled out socialism as a solution for the problems of industrial society. He saw nothing wrong with wealth in and of itself: "Any given accumulation of commercial wealth may be indicative, on the one hand, of faithful industries, progressive energies, and productive ingenuities; or, on the other, it may be indicative of mortal luxury, merciless tyranny, ruinous chicane."³ The rich and the poor had a perpetual relationship in history, and in a good society both sides would act from a sense of justice, charity, and love. Not socialism, but Christianity offers man safe passage out of the quagmire in which he now finds himself, bereft and friendless: "until the time come, and the kingdom, when Christ's gift of bread and bequest of peace shall be Unto this last as unto thee."⁴

Beard found in Ruskin's book not only a compelling interpretation of modern social problems, but also a call to action. With another American, Walter Vrooman, he founded Ruskin Hall as a college of the people, a workmen's university. The historian Harold Pollins writes, "The idea was to educate working

2. *Id.* at 19.

3. JOHN RUSKIN, *UNTO THIS LAST AND OTHER ESSAYS ON ART AND POLITICAL ECONOMY* 141 (1907).

4. *Id.* at 193.

men in order to achieve social change.”⁵ In an article that Beard wrote in 1936 for *The New Republic*, he explained how Ruskin College acquired its name. The organizational meeting had taken place in his own rooms at 11 Grove Street in Oxford. Referring to himself, Beard wrote, “An American ‘from the wilds of Indiana’ who had read Ruskin in the library of ‘a freshwater college’ proposed that the new institution be called ‘Ruskin Hall.’”⁶ The debate that ensued among the founders involved a discussion of *Unto This Last*: “That was the book that furnished a frame of reference for the students who started Ruskin College.”⁷ Other books also had influenced them, most notably by John Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer, Alfred Marshall, and Karl Marx: “But ‘Unto This Last’ served to give unity and purpose to their enterprise. Despite all the wrangles, battles and deviations, Ruskin’s teachings furnished a kind of anchor against storms, in the early days of the labor college.”⁸

After the founding of Ruskin College in February 1899, Beard continued to be engaged actively with the school, serving as its secretary, recruiting students as well as full-time and part-time teachers for the faculty, and winning the support of prominent union leaders. He also created Ruskin Hall correspondence courses for students. Beard had not yet made a definite career choice between university scholarship and social activism. He sought to do both. Amidst a whirl of Ruskin College-related activities, by the end of his first year at Oxford he managed to write a 50,000-word draft on the evolution of the office of the justice of the peace in England. Returning then to America with a hazy plan to spread the Ruskin College idea there, he continued to follow a dual career path, spending a term doing graduate work at Cornell while still deeply committed to the cause of worker education.

Beard married in 1899 and resumed his life in England, continuing to work for Ruskin College. His continued affiliation with the College included the writing that he did for *Young Oxford: A Monthly Magazine Devoted to the Ruskin Hall Movement*, which published its first issue in October 1899. From

5. HAROLD POLLINS, *THE HISTORY OF RUSKIN COLLEGE* 9 (1984).

6. Charles A. Beard, *Ruskin and the Babble of Tongues*, *NEW REPUBLIC*, Aug. 5, 1936, at 370, 372. Writing in the depths of the Depression, Beard recommended, “Perhaps in the crisis in thought that now besets us it will do some good to take up again ‘Unto This Last,’ and read it without anger or tears.” *Id.*

7. *Id.*

8. *Id.*

its beginnings, *Young Oxford* published many Beard articles, signed and unsigned. Imperialism, a subject that deeply interested him at this time, inspired two of his longest articles. Essentially, he interpreted imperialism in the manner of John Ruskin, as by and large a positive force in the world. In "A Living Empire," which appeared in October 1901, Beard claimed that the history of the entire world for the past three hundred years, most of all American history, was the result of imperialism. What did people think actually had been made manifest in America from the founding of the colonies on the Atlantic seaboard to the conquest of the West and the eradication of the frontier, if not, in its most thoroughgoing form, the dialectic of imperialism? The historical process in America involved the conquest and occupation of the land by white settlers at the expense of Indians, who suffered displacement where they were not annihilated. Beard viewed this process of American imperialism favorably: "the imperialism which produced the United States . . . is good."⁹ Americans, bad as they might be, are better than the Comanches. Thus, "the ultimate result has been relatively good."

Indeed, race, not class, mattered most to Beard at this time. He faulted contemporary American imperialism abroad only for the failure of Washington to consider the impact of its policies on white people: "Americans, sending at an enormous expense 600 teachers equipped to the Philippines to instruct naked natives while thousands of white children in American cities are underfed and undereducated, are not brute imperialists but self-destructive lunatics." From Beard's perspective, "an imperial victory will not be planting a flag over a collection of negro huts, or the organization of cannibals for commercial exploitation, but the planting of a new colony of rationally organized white men." To be sure, wasteful, parasite-ridden, and immoral empires were as bad as the anti-imperialists said they were, but for Beard "organized, healthy, sober, industrious, flesh and blood empires withstand the wreck of nations and the chaos of revolutions." The British empire seemed to him yet another relatively good historical outcome.

In a second installment of "A Living Empire," published in the same issue of *Young Oxford*, Beard explained further what he meant in stressing the connection between race and imperialism:

9. Charles A. Beard, *A Living Empire I*, 3 *YOUNG OXFORD AND THE RUSKIN HALL NEWS* (Oct. 1901) (on file at Ruskin College archives). The name of the magazine had changed in March 1901.

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“A truly imperial people cannot be reared under the economic conditions which prevail in western civilization today.”¹⁰ Empires required morally, mentally, and physically fit rulers. He had extreme measures in mind for the accomplishment of this requirement: “Parasites, wasters, luxury consumers, idle rich, gamblers, and all enemies of man must be ruthlessly eliminated.”¹¹ Racism he could not condone, but then professed two bewildering principles to show his aversion to it. First, “The only sane attitude which statesmen can adopt toward other races is that of non-mixture.”¹² The second principle he italicized for emphasis: “*Some life shall be repressed. Which shall it be?*”¹³ Drawing upon the lessons of the boyhood that he spent in an Indiana farming community, he queried that if we do not leave cattle-breeding to chance, why would we fail to take similar care with the breeding of children. Imperialism itself could not be condemned on principle, but racially heedless imperialist policies would injure the white race, he feared.

In his *Young Oxford* articles, Beard continued to speak the language of Ruskin. For practical use by a young historian, however, Ruskin’s message required translation into the idiom of historical scholarship. For this second stage of Beard’s intellectual development, his stay in England also figured prominently. He had come to Oxford to study constitutional history with William Stubbs, but this plan did not materialize. Instead, Beard became absorbed in the activities that led to the founding of Ruskin College, his researches in the Black Country, and the writing of his first book—a short Ruskin-inspired study titled *The Industrial Revolution*. Although Beard did not take a degree at Oxford or even make any official progress at all toward obtaining one, he did an enormous amount of historical reading during this period of his life. In 1902, he and Mary came to the conclusion that they were Americans after all, and this meant that the young couple and their daughter had to return to the United States. He then entered the graduate program at Columbia University and took a degree in 1904 with a dissertation begun at Oxford on “The Office of the Justice of the Peace in England,” which soon became his first published book in America.

10. Charles Beard, *A Living Empire II*, 3 YOUNG OXFORD AND THE RUSKIN HALL NEWS (Oct. 1901) (on file at Ruskin College archives).

11. *Id.*

12. *Id.*

13. *Id.*

In the year that Beard arrived at Columbia, Edwin R. A. Seligman published his non-Marxist *Economic Interpretation of History*. A professor of political economics at Columbia, Seligman claimed in his book, "The existence of man depends upon his ability to sustain himself; the economic life is therefore the fundamental condition of all life."¹⁴ Beard immediately fell under the spell of Seligman's ideas. In her biography of Beard, Ellen Nore states that he never ventured theoretically beyond Seligman.¹⁵

Before Seligman, however, the English historians already had marked the intellectual path that Beard would follow. In his second American book publication, *An Introduction to the English Historians*, Beard identified himself in the prefatory note as "a teacher[] of English history."¹⁶ He had envisaged the book as an anthology of readings for each of which a brief essay of his own would serve as an introduction. Beard's selections constitute for the most part a fairly standard list of great English historians: Frederic William Maitland, William Stubbs, Edward Augustus Freeman, George Macauley Trevelyan, and names of similar scholarly prestige. Most of his introductory essays consist of no more than a paragraph or two.

Of all the English historians in the Beard anthology, John Atkinson Hobson influenced his intellectual biography the most. While living in Manchester, he had met Hobson. His daughter Miriam identified Hobson, along with the socialist Charles Rowley, as two of the most important individuals to cross Beard's path at this time.¹⁷ Hobson and Rowley would have been particularly interesting to Beard because of their immense admiration for many of Ruskin's ideas. Indeed, in 1898 Hobson had written *John Ruskin Social Reformer*, which had received an enthusiastic notice in *Young Oxford*.¹⁸ Beard certainly read this book, and on the basis of his subsequent view of Ruskin he read it very closely.

"Mr. Ruskin will rank as the greatest social teacher of his age," Hobson insisted, for he had done more than anyone else to

14. EDWIN R. A. SELIGMAN, *THE ECONOMIC INTERPRETATION OF HISTORY* 3 (1902).

15. ELLEN NORE, *CHARLES A. BEARD: AN INTELLECTUAL BIOGRAPHY* 31 (1983).

16. CHARLES A. BEARD, *AN INTRODUCTION TO THE ENGLISH HISTORIANS*, at v (1906).

17. Letter from Miriam Vagts to David Horsfield (Nov. 1975) (on file with the Ruskin College Archives).

18. *Ruskin the Reformer*, 1 *YOUNG OXFORD: A MONTHLY MAGAZINE DEVOTED TO THE RUSKIN HALL MOVEMENT* (May 1900) (on file at Ruskin College archives).

bring before the public the social problems created by modern capitalism.¹⁹ Hobson placed him in a direct line of intellectual descent from Thomas Carlyle as an iconic figure in the history of cultural conservatism. Ruskin felt “a passionate storm of sympathy” for Carlyle and particularly for his 1843 book, *Past and Present*.²⁰ *Unto this Last* took its bearings from Carlyle’s fierce conservative polemic against the chaotic and formless modern world of money-grubbing, political corruption, and desecration of natural and esthetic beauty. The same must be said, if at the one remove provided by Ruskin’s pen, of the young Charles Beard’s earliest writings.

For Beard’s intellectual formation, Hobson’s two greatest achievements in *John Ruskin Social Reformer* concerned his criticisms of Carlyle and Ruskin. That Beard did not become some kind of conservative Pre-Raphaelite esthete ever pining for the vanished certainties of medieval Christendom probably owes more to Hobson than to any other single thinker. It was the social democratic Hobson who in his mixed review of Ruskin’s work gave Beard the pointers he needed to salvage the principles of *Unto This Last* for progressive politics.

The first half of *John Ruskin Social Reformer* proceeds as a celebration of the master’s brilliance and originality, but then, suddenly, the book turns into an indictment of him or, rather, of certain ideas that Hobson thinks stand in a perverse relationship with Ruskin’s philosophy as a whole. He thrashed Ruskin’s “tempered feudalism,” especially the notion that the captains of industry, against all historical experience, could be trusted to keep a just order among people they were pleased to regard as their inferiors. Such a benighted Carlyle-induced hero-worshipping principle had led Ruskin into a host of mortifying misjudgments about the belief systems and folkways of economic elites: “At present, the vast majority of them are satisfied that, in taking all the rent, profits, and other emoluments they can get, and in spending them for their private purposes, they are strictly ‘within their rights.’”²¹ Elites always acted this way. The current crop would be no different; they would not change of their own accord. “Social evils require social remedies,” Hobson argued.²² The general will would have to be engaged, and this meant government intervention in the economy “to break down the evil

19. JOHN ATKINSON HOBSON, *JOHN RUSKIN SOCIAL REFORMER*, at v-vi (1898).

20. *Id.* at 39.

21. *Id.* at 197.

22. *Id.* at 199.

power which competitive industry for profit places in the hands of the least scrupulous competitors.”²³

Beard would have found in Hobson’s critique of Ruskin’s politics the main ideas that would define his own progressivism. First of all, the government must be wrested from the lobbies that currently control it and transformed into an instrument for public well-being. The lobbies defiled democracy and made a mockery of it. The whole national organism had to be involved in the work of government, not merely, as in Ruskin’s prescription for society, a hereditary caste. Hobson also faulted Ruskin for his views on the subjects of war and imperialism:

The sanction and incitement given by Mr. Ruskin to the English nation “to undertake aggressive war, according to their force, wherever they are assured that their authority would be helpful and protective,” however laudable as a theory of national conduct, is one of the most dangerous pieces of advice that could be tendered to a people always able to persuade themselves that their interference is “helpful and protective,” when it extends the influence of England over a new area of the world.²⁴

For British imperialism in the modern era, Beard relied entirely in his anthology on Hobson’s *Imperialism: A Study*, which had appeared in 1902, a few months after the publication of the semi-Kiplingesque “Living Empire” articles in *Young Oxford*. What a difference a few months and the reading of one book can make. He rated Hobson as the master historian of imperialism for his thorough understanding of the ways in which the British possessing classes had imposed their will on the government. The vast sums required to secure an empire could never be recovered from the income that the colonies might return to the mother country. It cost more to raise and provision the army and navy and then to provide for administration and infrastructure than these places, on the whole, were worth, to say nothing of mounting risks of war between imperialist powers in inveterate competition with one another for exploitable territories, markets, and resources. Why embark on a course of empire, then, if the policy involved unrecoverable costly outlays and risked pitting the European powers, who were one another’s best customers, in a fratricidal war? Because, Hobson answered, imperialism worked beautifully

23. *Id.* at 203.

24. *Id.* at 321–22.

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for the economic elites, who profited from it at the nation's expense.

Beard took care to include in his anthology Hobson's thesis about American imperialism, a phenomenon that had assumed its fully-fledged modern form in the Spanish-American War of 1898. "[T]he driving force of the economic factor," had been the same for the United States as for Britain.²⁵ The notion of American politicians serving as front men for the power brokers of Wall Street, as in the case of Theodore Roosevelt for Rockefeller, Morgan, and Hanna, conformed exactly to Beard's mature understanding of the relationship between politics and foreign policy in the United States. Their officially unspoken but ever-renewing mutual support system, as described by Hobson, eventually would give Beard his starting point for understanding all American wars. Nothing that he subsequently would find in the archives would cause him to change his mind about the fundamental and abiding validity of Hobson's thesis, to which American history in no way constituted an exception.

In Beard's 1936 memoir article about his time in Oxford, he linked Ruskin and Hobson: "Ruskin's spirit lives—in his own works, in the lives of those ancients who knew him in the flesh, in countless books, including John A. Hobson's, and in the thought of British statesmen."²⁶ The mature Beard echoed his younger self in claiming that the West had arrived at the point of decay foretold by Ruskin. No one more than Hobson, other perhaps than Beard himself, could be said to have carried forward into the twentieth century the essential spirit of Ruskin's indictment against the amoral and materialist basis of the modern world. An intellectual ferment that had begun in Beard's mind while he was still a college student, by reading *Unto This Last*, vigorously continued during his Oxford years, as amended by Hobson's critique of Ruskin.

Beard's life experiences outside of the Oxford University classrooms, in the Black Country and at Ruskin Hall, fueled his skepticism about the pretensions of the capitalist status quo and propelled him along the path he took as a historian. In the work of English historians, above all Hobson, he found the scholarly examples that he needed for a career in his chosen profession. A Hobson-like sensibility stemming originally from Ruskin's *Unto*

25. JOHN ATKINSON HOBSON, *IMPERIALISM: A STUDY* 74 (1975), cited in BEARD, *supra* note 16, at 626.

26. Beard, *supra* note 6, at 372.

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This Last would animate Beard's analysis of United States history, which he synthesized in the classic *Rise of American Civilization* as "the American acquisitive process."²⁷ He had left England with a cause, and it would keep him going at his writing desk for a lifetime.

27. 2 CHARLES A. BEARD & MARY R. BEARD, *THE RISE OF AMERICAN CIVILIZATION* 407 (1935).